

This article was downloaded by: [Washington University in St Louis]
On: 03 October 2014, At: 06:38
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number:
1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street,
London W1T 3JH, UK



The Journal of Legislative Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fjls20>

Parliamentary Democracy Online: Lessons from Europe

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Published online: 05 Jun 2008.

To cite this article: Xiudian Dai & Philip Norton (2007) Parliamentary Democracy Online: Lessons from Europe, *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 13:3, 477-482, DOI: [10.1080/13572330701500946](https://doi.org/10.1080/13572330701500946)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13572330701500946>

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IV. CONCLUSION

Parliamentary Democracy Online: Lessons from Europe

XIUDIAN DAI and PHILIP NORTON

The relationship between parliament and new information and communications technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet, is becoming ever more complicated. By means of conclusion, we highlight the key findings from our comparative study of four parliaments, the British, European, Portuguese and Swedish Parliaments, which have all adopted the Internet as an essential element of their parliamentary communication strategy. It is clear from our research that the Internet is already having a significant impact upon the operation of parliamentary institutions. Parliamentary and parliamentarians' use of the Internet has also raised important issues that ought to be considered cautiously by policy makers, and further academic study is important to the search for solutions.

The relationship between parliament and new information and communications technologies (ICTs), in particular the Internet, is becoming ever more complicated. Among the many themes that have been addressed by the individual contributions in this volume, a number of thought-provoking points have emerged. Here, we provide a summary of the key issues.

PARLIAMENTARY AND PARLIAMENTARIANS' USE OF THE INTERNET

Our research confirms that parliaments in Europe have, to varied degrees, jumped onto the bandwagon of the Internet revolution. All of the four case-study parliaments, the British, European, Portuguese and Swedish, have adopted Internet technologies as an essential element of parliamentary communication strategy.

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Our research shows that parliamentary institutions in Europe have already made, or are making, strategic responses to the opportunities offered by new ICTs. The UK Parliament, as discussed in Philip Norton's article, voted in March 2007 for each member to have an annual £10,000 'communication allowance', which may help further promote the use of new media technologies at the Parliament. The case study by Xiudian Dai on the European Parliament (EP) shows a high level of institutional commitment as demonstrated by the allocation of an annual budget of €4.36 million for ICT equipment and infrastructure at the EP, in 2006, complemented by an annual ICT maintenance budget of €470,000 from 2007 onward. We found that each of the four case-study parliaments has its own in-house ICT team responsible for the installation, maintenance and user support in relation to ICTs. Magnus Lindh and Lee Miles also noted that the Swedish Riksdag was considering raising the level of parliamentary funding so that MPs could afford to employ their own assistant.

The provision of substantial resources has enabled each case-study parliament to maintain its own computer servers, which are the central nerves of the institutional ICT environment. These parliaments have all launched email services to political and staff members, complemented by the maintenance of a parliamentary website and an intranet.

Our research found that the vast majority of parliamentarians were positive about the potentials of the Internet as a new tool for political and parliamentary communication. However, there are differences between the parliaments/parliamentarians in their response to the digital revolution. First of all, politicians' online behaviour cannot be fully explained by 'offline' factors, as argued by Rosa Vicente-Merino in her article. While most parliamentarians at the British, European and Swedish Parliaments have their personal website hyperlinked with the parliamentary web (*via* their personal profile page), none of the Portuguese MPs had done this, at the time of our web survey.

Secondly, among those parliamentarians who have officially published their email contact(s) on the parliamentary website, there was a difference in their preference over the type of email address that they would like to use. As indicated in Dai's article on MP's use of email, 97.5 per cent of Swedish MPs have decided to publish the parliament-assigned official email address on the parliament website. This makes an interesting contrast with both the Portuguese MPs and MEPs, who were divided into roughly a half-half split in their choice of the type of email address between the official email address and private address. Fitting into none of these patterns, the UK Parliament website does not publish individual MP's full email address; instead, the majority of them (82.4 per cent) arranged to have their emails forwarded to them on a daily basis by a third-party organisation, through a hyperlink next to the MP's name.

Thirdly, it was found in our research that political parties exert a significant amount of influence over parliamentarians' use (or non-use) of the Internet. This political factor, as manifested in the cases of the British, Portuguese and Swedish Parliaments, seems to explain a lot about the reasons why parliamentarians went online (or stayed offline) and to what extent they would make use of the Internet. Due to the nature of the Portuguese electoral system that makes political parties (or Political Groups), rather than individual MPs, the most important factor, citizens tend to make more contact with party organisations than with MPs. Likewise, as argued in Cristina Leston-Bandeira's article, Portuguese MPs tend to look to their political group for disseminating information to citizens about their parliamentary work. This in part explains, from a negative point of view, why Portuguese MPs appeared to have the lowest level of Internet usage compared with politicians from other parliaments covered by our study. Through testing different models of parliamentary use of the Internet in the UK, Norton concludes that the most important factor that drives MPs to use the Internet is the desire to promote their own and their party's cause. Lindh and Miles also argue that, in the Swedish case, it is party organisations that will be the dominant factor in shaping the preferences of individual MPs over the use of ICTs.

Finally, the level of budget (or support) available to individual parliamentarians has an impact upon their decision on the use of ICTs. Although the Internet is not necessarily a difficult technology to handle by users, the process of using it, such as the maintenance of a personal website, handling of an email account, managing an online forum, etc. would require additional input in terms of staff time, funding and expertise. In some parliaments, such as the British and European Parliaments, where each parliamentarian is usually supported by several office staff and assistants, and where parliamentary provision of ICT equipment is not an issue, it is relatively easier for a parliamentarian to develop and maintain a personal website. This certainly does not apply in the case of Portugal, where it is not uncommon that one assistant supports several MPs. Although some Portuguese MPs considered the Internet as interesting, they would not have the financial means to keep an individual website. On a comparable level, in Sweden, one assistant supports five MPs.

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNET UPON PARLIAMENT

The use of ICTs, in particular the Internet, was found in our study to have a growing level of impact upon parliamentary democracy. First of all, the Internet can have an impact upon parliament-citizen relations in the way that this medium serves as a digital bridge between a parliament and the outside world. The parliamentary website has already become an important tool for the parliament to 'market' itself to the citizens. A growing amount of information

about parliamentary institutions and the legislative process is being made available on the Internet. This makes the Internet arguably more important and effective than any other type of communications technology in history, in making the parliament a transparent institution. It is not an exaggeration that the parliamentary website has already become a virtual face of the parliament.

Perhaps to a lesser degree, nevertheless no less important, the parliamentary website can also function as a communication platform between the parliament and citizens. Each of the four case-study parliaments' websites, for example, already offered facilities for citizens to contact the parliament directly either to request information or ask questions. It is worth noting, though, that online petitions did not necessarily get answered electronically; more often than not, petition questions were answered *via* the traditional post. Despite this, e-petitions serve as an additional channel for the parliament to know what citizens want to know.

Combined, the informational and communicational features of the parliamentary website have the potential to help improve the parliament's relations with citizens.

Second, inside the parliament, there are signs that the use of ICTs is showing an impact upon the institutional structure of a parliament and the established parliamentary procedures, although this is still in the early days. In Westminster, the two Houses – House of Lords and House of Commons – recently created a unified parliamentary department, for the first time in history, to deal with ICT matters. Among others, the development and use of intranet within each parliament is worth mentioning. In a highly compartmentalised institution such as the Portuguese Parliament, a single intranet is used by the whole parliament, including the Political Groups. Most of our parliamentarian interviewees had the view that the parliamentary intranet today has become indispensable to their parliamentary work. It is already the case that some types of parliamentary information and communication are available only in a digital form. A major challenge at the moment to the further digitisation of internal parliamentary communication is the requirement of parliamentarians' signature to documents. Adoption of digital signatures in the future could provide a solution to this problem. Undoubtedly, the use of intranet and email communication will lead to the reconsidering of the established parliamentary procedures.

Third, there is also evidence suggesting that the Internet can affect the relationship between individual parliamentarians and their party organisation. Leston-Bandeira found those MPs who use email to communicate with citizens can expect to develop direct contact with citizens, thus by-passing the mediation by their all-dominant Political Group. Lindh and Miles arrived at a similar conclusion that individual Swedish MPs can be electronically

'empowered' through the use of the Internet and this might lead to internal party restructuring and reduced organisational hierarchy to the advantage of the MPs, whose strong loyalties to their parties are well known. To be sure, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for parties to have an effective control over what their Parliamentary Members say through an ever-widening range of communication channels such as website, email and blogging.

It is worth noting that in the case of the UK Parliament, as Norton found, the more rebellious the MP the less likely they are to have a personal website and rebellious MPs tend to be less interested in the use of blogging compared with the party loyalists. One would expect, as hypothesised by the representative model, that rebels might be keener on pursuing the communication power offered by the Internet in order to have their voice heard.

PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS OF THE INTERNET: KEY ISSUES AND FUTURE RESEARCH

During our research a number of important issues have been raised with regard to parliamentary and parliamentarians' use of the Internet.

First, the technical features of the Internet were generally under-exploited by parliamentarians. Vicente-Merino in her analysis of parliamentarians' use of the web and Dai's study on the EP in this volume pointed out that both parliamentary and parliamentarians' websites provided very low levels of interactivity. In other words, both institutional and individual websites largely serve the purpose of information provision, rather than interactive engagement of citizens.

Second, it is rather simplistic to assume that the use of the Internet would improve efficiency and save time. On the contrary, the use of the Internet has created a widespread concern over the loss of working hours. Our research shows that, although MPs were generally positive about the potential of the Internet to become a new tool for parliamentary communication, they were also faced with the problem of email overloading. It was felt that dealing with the growing volume of electronic communication has placed additional pressure on the parliamentarians. In addition to legitimate emails from MPs' own constituency, there is also the phenomenon of spam, which accounts for a significant proportion of email flow. Most MPs found it simply impossible to deal with each message personally. In practice, as found in the cases of the British, European and Swedish Parliaments, many MPs have delegated the responsibility of email management to their office staff and assistants.

Third, there was a general lack of institutional strategies and codes of conduct for coping with the challenges posed by electronic communication. The existing institutional framework of parliamentary communication was

created with reference to the old media, such as posted letters. Parliaments, such as the UK Parliament, have developed clear guidance on MPs' handling of letters from their constituents. It is unclear whether existing institutional guidance ought to be extended to email. Should emails be dealt with more speedily than letters? If yes, citizens using letters to communicate with their MP would be disadvantaged; if no, email communication as a new medium would lose its 'newness'. Some parliamentarians actually reply to email enquiries through posted letters – equity takes precedence over efficiency.

Finally, there is an ethical dimension to parliamentarians' use of ICTs. Many parliamentarians have set up their personal website using their parliamentary budget. A question to be asked here is whether these parliamentarians could use this website for advancing their personal and party political course in addition to performing their parliamentary duties. The same concern is also applicable to other aspects of ICT equipment allocated to parliamentarians such as their official email account, computers, personal digital assistant (PDA) and mobile phones. The fact that MPs in the UK may not use websites to promote their parties if the websites are maintained from public funds and MEPs, as confirmed in our interviews, were aware of the expectation that the parliamentary budget should not be used for political purposes has put politicians in a difficult position. Is it the best solution for parliamentarians to have multiple websites funded by different sources to serve different purposes?

Empirical data gathered through questionnaire surveys, web content analysis, face-to-face interviews and workshops, as presented in this volume, have demonstrated the extent to which the Internet influences parliamentary communication in its unique ways. While our findings will serve as an addition to existing knowledge and literature about the impact of the Internet upon parliamentary democracy, there is a need in future research to extend the range of case studies. In particular, the inclusion of new democracies in the European Union will make comparative studies more interesting. We also recognise the need for re-visiting the same case-study parliaments so that any change in the pattern of parliamentary and parliamentarians' use of the Internet over a period of time can be analysed.